

The End of Parliamentary Government in Europe

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Has parliamentary government, after almost two hundred years of honoured service, come to an end in Europe? The fact that Spain had two elections in seven months and is still nowhere near a stable government is just the latest of many signs that it is indeed so – and I wonder what the ruling classes in the European countries, excluding France, are waiting for in order to take note of the fact and to do, night and day, in order to put in place the necessary remedies.

After the fourth elections in **Spain** in four years there has been a lot of talk about the outcome, about the most improbable (though indispensable) parliamentary coalitions between parties that have always been at war between each other. How often should the poor Spanish voters be recalled to the polls? And how can we be surprised if many citizens are increasingly tired of this, choose to stay at home or flock to new parties that until yesterday did not exist and may deflate just as quickly, like left-wing *Podemos* and liberal-nationalist *Ciudadanos* and maybe soon also the far-right Vox party?

The case of Spain shows that the depressing story of parliamentarism in **Italy** is no longer isolated. Italian case still stands out for its specific features for the worse: It is the only country to have two large populist parties, one of them potentially the strongest of the whole party system, and it is the only country to have the madness of a parliamentary regime based on the double trust of not one but two chambers. Nevertheless, it appears that all of Europe is Italy now, some to a larger, some to a lesser degree.

Belgium's last general elections coincided with the European elections in May 2019. Six months have passed, and there still is no new government. But after all, we all know that Belgium holds the record in that respect: 563 days, 19 months. In **Austria**, two months after the election, at least we know which parties will negotiate for a government. The formation of the last Rutte government in the **Netherlands** took a lot of time, too, while in **Denmark** the Social-Democrats govern as an ultra-minority with merely 48 out of 179 members of the *Folketing*, supported by six other parties commanding further 46 votes (split into "groups" of, respectively, 16, 14, 13, 1, 1 and 1 members), a coalition of seven that resembles the paralyzed Prodi II Cabinet in Italy ten years ago (2006-2007).

In **Germany**, the „great coalition“ of CDU/CSU and SPD was until 2017 overwhelmingly dominant, leaving hardly any space for the opposition in the *Bundestag*. Since then, the support of both parties, particularly the SPD, has dropped precipitously, to a point where both combined seem hardly able to reach a simple majority. In the meantime, a right wing anti-system party has established itself, particularly in the East-German Länder, to a point where it seems extremely

hard to form a coalition against them. The relatively meticulous and precise coalition agreements customary in Germany are holding up worse and worse, while both the Social and Christian Democrats are busy fixing their leadership issues.

As for the **United Kingdom**, the homeland of parliamentarianism, it has become its own caricature during the last three years, and perhaps worse. Repeated elections, minority governments, divided parties, small groups capable of blackmailing those who govern, embarrassing paralysis under the eyes of the entire world, with inept and/or reckless prime ministers at the helm who had to negotiate with rapidly diminishing credibility. Whether or not the British will manage to get out of this nightmare we will see on 12 December, but chances are that there will still be no functional majority in Westminster after that date.

What is going on?

It appears that parliamentary democracy is no longer able to guarantee the minimum performance of unity and government that a nation is entitled to expect. It is not of course the fault "in itself" of parliamentarianism: it is the consequence of a changed social reality, of new behaviours and attitudes on the part of citizens. A form of government is not an abstract thing and should not be judged by theory: it is good or bad depending on how it relates to the society it is supposed to serve.

In a parliamentary democracy, it is worth remembering, the government can survive and act only if it can count on the loyal and permanent support of a sufficient number of parliamentarians. Without that either quits or, if it does not, it becomes semi-impotent. Ensuring adequate majorities in the assemblies of the European parliamentary democracies has become an increasingly difficult task and one of ever worse performance and durability.

There are two main reasons for that: a) the increasing fragmentation that tends to overwhelm any electoral system (mostly proportional), and above all b) the tendency of citizens, societies and politicians to live politics in a radically different way from the past. The relations between competing parties today (and everywhere) have changed radically. Today, divisions are no longer based on conflicting interests, they are genuinely or artificially based on identity, values and cultural issues or even openly ethnicity and race. This makes it much harder for one political force to achieve sufficient consensus to govern alone, and also for coalitions to form and remain manageable. In short, the need for consensual democracy and compromise grows at a time when the necessary conditions are increasingly lacking (and in fact those who lend themselves to compromise are regularly beaten at elections everywhere).

With the internal challenges that each country faces, with the international challenges that Europe faces in a world of authoritarian or non-democratic democracies, how long can we imagine paying the price for such a level of dysfunctionality? The lesson of the 20th century was that democracies were ruined not by their weakness but by the strength of their governments and regimes. The time has come to remind us of this and to act accordingly.

I see no other way, at the moment, than to give the citizens the power to vote directly for the executive. It is debatable whether the best way to implement this would be to elect a prime minister as well as a parliament, or a president and a parliament, and what measure of coordination between the two votes would be required. But direct investiture of the executive is needed if we do not want to repeat, in different forms, the mistakes of the past. It's never going to be too soon.

On another note: as you may have noticed, the dysfunctionality of parliamentarism has severe reverberations also on the EU level. The Von der Leyen Commission was blocked from entering into operation partly because member states couldn't agree on their candidate for Commissioner. Thanks heaven Spain had already done that before the election.

